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The Intellectual, Social and Political Geography of Palestinian Society / Issues Concerning the West Bank and Gaza Strip

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Initial Notes

All thoughts expressed in this paper are based on recognition of the numerous facts that have emerged during the past century, which has been characterized by a continuous Israeli, Zionist expansionist policy. This policy is both dynamic and cumulative in nature, and has achieved most of its goals. Moreover, it has attained complete and steady support from the West, which, like it, has chosen to remain indifferent to the existence of the Palestinian people, their rights, their needs and their interests. The current situation in the West Bank and Gaza Strip is a reflection of these Israeli, Zionist successes on Palestinian and Arab land on the one hand, and a reflection of the failure or relapse of the Arab and Palestinian liberation plan on the other.

The Zionist movement, since its official inception at the Basle Conference in 1897, has encompassed an expansive outlook in conjunction with an ideological belief. Furthermore, in strategic terms, it has a long-term plan incorporating such a vision. Correspondingly, the Arab nationalistic plan regressed in favor of the nationalistic plan which, in turn, retreated in favor of the Islamic plan. In essence, the Islamic plan stumbled before ever rising.

If the Palestinian people cannot congregate on their land and exercise their right to self-determination, they will surely be incapable of halting the raping process before completion of the Zionist vision. The Zionist plan has succeeded in realizing that vision, with only a few minor issues waiting to be implemented such as the creation of a Middle Eastern market and the consolidation of the Israeli existence in some areas of Jordan, the Syrian Golan Heights, and South Lebanon through occupation or domination.

Introduction

Talking about the intellectual, social and political geography in the Palestinian society requires dealing with complexities and intrusions involving economic, social and political variables and their relation with the demographic variables in both areas (West Bank and Gaza Strip).

It is necessary also not to ignore the transitional nature of the present Palestinian situation when conducting any analysis of issues pertaining to the West Bank and Gaza Strip. On the one hand, Palestinian society is experiencing a transitional phase, moving from being a society under direct military occupation to a society governed by a 'national', non-foreign authority. This authority has civil powers without having sovereignty or control over the resources, borders and relations with others. Accordingly, this society, due to many factors, the most prominent being the economic

and social variables, is undergoing a transitional phase: moving from a society dominated by traditional beliefs and familial ties to a 'modern' society, where ideally, the qualities of freedom, equality, political and intellectual multiplicity, the rule of law and citizens' rights rise above everything else.

Ever since the Palestinian Authority took control of the Gaza and Jericho areas in May of 1994, a new phase in the Palestinians' civil society began with the establishment of security and ministerial institutions. In order to prove its existence and its presence, the Palestinian Authority began clashing with all opponents of its policies, and a number of confrontations between the Authority's security institutions and local citizens occurred, with many wounded and killed and hundreds of others arrested. The Authority did not stop there in this battle of existence, but deliberately prevented some newspapers from publishing and impeded their work, interfering in their affairs and going so far as to issue a number of closure orders. This triggered the first division in the ranks of the people, between the supporters and the proponents of the agreements signed by the PLO and Israel in September 1993.

Correspondingly, the suppressive practices of the Israeli occupational forces and settlers continued unabated. Israel pursued the policy of military blockades and closures, separating between the West Bank and Gaza Strip areas and between both areas and the city of Jerusalem. This situation resulted in another type of division and distribution, and both types of division will cause the people in the West Bank and Gaza Strip massive losses.

This new political situation engendered a number of problems, including the appearance of signs of splits involving individuals and groups, signs of withdrawal toward self interest and individualism instead of the common and collective good, and the rise of familial fanaticism and the re-emergence of tribal loyalties. Invariably, chaos prevailed and all forms of corruption and favoritism surfaced, leading to feelings of depression and regression instead of feelings of cooperation and solidarity, which had existed before this new political situation. The 'modern society beliefs' received a decisive blow, causing the voices of democracy and the rule of law to retreat.

Furthermore, the restrictive measures imposed on movement and communications between the West Bank and Gaza Strip has caused and will continue to cause grave consequences by threatening all efforts to establish a national system in the different political, social, organizational (unions), vocational and economic fields. Many of the joint institutions established during the Israeli occupation and before the PA took control of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip were afflicted with inner divisions, and the political parties and social institutions were not adequately protected from this onslaught of damage.

In addition, the continuous Israel occupation strengthened the geographical division between the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The rise of the Palestine National Authority led to a political division, due to its stance in regards to the signed agreements with Israel.

For the first time in modern history, the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip find themselves governed by an elected Palestinian Authority, acquired by a political agreement with the occupational force. Both the West Bank and Gaza Strip, part of historical Palestine, have known only natural or compulsory integration under occupational forces, and an occupational force caused their separation. After the establishment of Israel in 1948 on 87 percent of the historical Palestinian land, the Gaza Strip was controlled by the Egyptian Administration while Jordan controlled the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. The geographical, political and social separation continued until 1967, when the Israeli military occupational force dominated both areas.

The geographical, political and social separation resulted in a different experience in both regions (West Bank and Gaza Strip). The Gaza Strip suffered from a dense population, the development of refugee camps, poverty, and unemployment after the catastrophe of 1948. Meanwhile in the West Bank, life was also harsh. Poverty spread, and many social classes suffered from a lack of income and work opportunities after the displacement process and collective uprooting that resulted from the aforementioned catastrophe. However, both regions developed disparate experiences due to different political and economic situations: differences pertaining to quality but not the degree of cruelty, oppression and inhumanity.

In general, the citizens of the West Bank shared the following beliefs and ideas regarding the citizens of the Gaza Strip:

There was widespread poverty, unemployment, despair and misery in the refugee camps.

Social and political backwardness was prevalent.

The Gaza Strip was characterized by continuous confrontations and its citizens were exceptionally bold.

As for the beliefs and ideas of the Gaza Strip citizens concerning their brothers in the West Bank, they can be summarized as follows:

The citizens of the West Bank were more economically and socially advanced.

The citizens of the West Bank controlled the decision-making process and monopolized Arab and foreign subsidies.

The citizens of the West Bank felt superior to the Gazans.

The geographical separation between the two regions led to the existence of this psychological barrier, making it a fertile ground for negative conceptions and mutual suspicion to flourish. However, the glorious Uprising, which started in the Gaza District, forced West Bank citizens to see Gaza citizens as more revolutionary, combative and prepared to sacrifice everything. This strengthened their feelings of respect towards

their brothers in Gaza on the one hand, and rid the citizens of Gaza of the feeling that there was a wide gap between the two groups of Palestinians on the other. It also helped both West Bank citizens and Gaza Strip citizens to rid themselves of all previous misconceptions, and to surpass 'media' impressions about individuals and groups.

After the PLO transferred the weight of its political power from Tunis to Gaza, a new gap appeared as if in reaction to previous events. The process of concentration and consolidation began, including economic development in the Gaza Strip. A situation characterized by complaining and grumbling was seen in the West Bank, similar to the situation that had once existed in the Gaza Strip, with the public talking about the injustices that prevailed in the West Bank, and the privileges 'enjoyed' by the Gaza Strip in all the various areas.

Features of the Social And Economic Infrastructure that Remained in the West Bank and Gaza Strip

Despite the influence left by the Egyptian Administration in the Gaza Strip and that of the Jordanian Administration in Jerusalem and the West Bank, both areas show dissimilarities in the social structure and topography. This led to the appearance of dissimilarities in values and performance. Both areas suffered occasionally from tensions between the incoming refugees and the residents of the cities and villages, and from high population density and problems resulting from the distribution of the inhabitants between camps, cities and villages. The West Bank is markedly different from the Gaza Strip especially in terms of having more geographical space and a variety of topographical areas, which resulted in both the establishment of a stable social structure and a lower population density in the former during the period of Jordanian control. However, this distinction was considerably shaken after the onslaught of settlement and the confiscation of agricultural land, hills and mountains which, in general, resulted in the diminishment of differences in population density and scenery in the West Bank.

It is no surprise that the Palestinian economy was destroyed once Israel subjected the West Bank and the Gaza Strip to military control: changing it to a dependent economy and forcing it to open its markets to Israeli products. During a quarter century of settlement building, confiscation of resources and usurpation of water resources, Israel managed to create dualistic societies within the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Besides concentrating on isolating Palestinian population communities, it established an industrial and agricultural settlement community. In essence, the settlement community formed an extension of the Israeli economy and society, despite being isolated from its geographical environment and its population extending within the West Bank and Gaza Strip areas, thereby affecting the demographic and geographic features of both.

The settlement process not only deprived the peasants of their land or at least from cultivating that land, but also aided the process of transforming the peasant and most of

the refugees to the status of hired help in the Israeli market. These peasants were not transformed into a Palestinian working class due to the absence of Palestinian capitalism capable of absorbing such a workforce; instead, they became daytime workers in the Israeli production process, but only for as long as they work in the Israeli market. As soon as they returned to their homes in the villages and refugee camps, they return to the social class they belonged to before working in Israeli factories. This compulsory process of transformation into a working class leaves no room for the development of class relations, either within the working class in which the worker finds himself or with his peers from the same area or from other geographical areas. Thus, integration was impossible to achieve between those living in the Gaza Strip area and their peers in the West Bank, and the distances and differences remained ingrained and unchanged. Indeed, by employing the tactic of separation and the policy of long closures in both regions the occupation authorities succeeded in widening the gap between them and increasing the degree of suspicion and mistrust. In spite of this, the common denominator, which was apparent to all, remained the submission of all Palestinian workers to Israeli discriminatory practices to the same degree. Also common was their joint hatred, animosity and struggle with regard to these discriminatory practices.

After the establishment of the PA and contrary to the expectations and promises of donor countries, instead of there being an improvement in living conditions, the poverty and destitution circle widened further, the rate of unemployment increased, and all societal classes were plagued by day-to-day living concerns. The condition of the middle class declined considerably and it turned into a poor class, similar to other poor working classes. This new social condition will lead it to express itself through new political institutions by electing political representatives or forming political parties to represent it.

As for the changes that occurred in the status of the working class and peasants, due to the Gulf states refraining from absorbing the Palestinian workforce on the one hand, and the work restrictions and closures imposed on those working in Israel on the other, not to mention the Palestinian Authority's policy of keeping the Palestinian economy a dependent and marginal economy, they led to deep transformations in the class structure, which can be summarized as follows:

A sharp decline in the living conditions of the working class, involving increased poverty and destitution.

The widening of the gap in terms of living conditions between the working class and the poor from the middle class and those working in the governmental sector.

The disappearance of the special characteristics of the working and peasant classes. In its own way, the Authority relied more and more on the role of its security institutions to maintain general order on the one hand, and to confront these social classes on the other.

This situation led to the following:

Both the West Bank and Gaza Strip becoming hostages in the hands of Israel, which sought to guarantee the protection of the current political system.

The Palestinian economy in the West Bank and Gaza Strip remaining at the mercy of donor countries, increasing its dependency on the Israeli economy and preventing the rise of a national, Palestinian economy capable of protecting itself and its citizens.

The rise of a new category of capitalists and influential people, and the rise of many corporations belonging to the PA, which are afforded no respect, and which have no legal basis and lack accountability.

The emergence of a new middle class represented by the bureaucratic PA and the employees in its different institutions.

The expansion of the circle of corruption and favoritism, the assault on the property of people, and disagreements regarding ownership rights.

The emergence of the phenomenon of 'returnee' and 'resident', and the intensification of the struggle between both groups.

The absence of a viable economic infrastructure in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

The PA adopted the practice of misleading people by limiting the reasons for the decline in the economic and living situation to Israel, which regularly imposes political and economic blockades on everyone. Depleted from their suffering, many people shifted their loyalties to a fundamental, political religion. One of the paradoxes is that Hamas and not the leftists, who claim to represent the workers, peasants, and the deprived, working social class, became a sanctuary and a refuge for these classes. Thus, Israel was saved from possible confrontations while the Authority avoided the occurrence of clashes. The political platform of Hamas was incapable of exploiting or capitalizing on the suffering of the majority of people.

The violent struggle between the Palestinians and the Israeli military occupation, which has continued for more than 30 years, brought about important transformations in the social and political structure of both regions (West Bank and Gaza Strip). The most prominent change was that these new social classes gained influential authority within the PLO's different factions at the expense of the withdrawal of traditional groups encompassing the upper and bourgeois class and the leaderships with loyalties to the Arab systems, which were most notable during the Jordanian administration in the West Bank and the Egyptian administration in the Gaza Strip. This struggle, which reached its peak with the beginning of the glorious Palestinian Uprising, transferred the center of political power from the big cities to the villages and refugee camps, and exchanged the traditional leadership with a more youthful leadership.

For the first time ever, on national soil, a nationalistic and popular leadership emerged in the fields of struggle with the occupation and within and outside prisons. Its social structure was different in that it included new social groups such as workers and women who followed a program set by the PLO. One of the major paradoxes is that the advancement of this new group to leadership positions reached its peak during the violent battle with the occupation, in order to consolidate the sole legitimacy and authority of the PLO. In addition, those martyrs who were killed in the national struggle with the Israeli occupational forces were known as PLO martyrs. After the rise of the Authority, however, these leaderships were pushed aside and stripped of their authority.

Political Characteristics of the Society in the West Bank and Gaza Strip

The absence of a distinct and united Palestinian social, economic structure in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and the existence of many security institutions helped promote the belief that the values espoused by the Palestinian political system do not encourage democracy. Even though all indications point to the fact that the desired values are democratic values, such as intellectual and political multiplicity, freedom of expression, equality, regular elections, negotiations with the PA, and the separation between the three powers, these political practices, in reality, confirm in a clear manner the restrictions on public freedom, the control of legislative and executive agencies, the steering of judicial authorities, the spread of corruption, connections, and nepotism, the absence of self-criticism *vis-à-vis* the leadership and the fact that others are deprived of being able to criticize its performance. All of this has caused tension to build up between general principles and daily behavior, adding one more contradiction to the many suffered by both regions (West Bank and Gaza Strip).

After more than three decades of nationalistic work within a united framework, the Oslo Agreement of facilitated wide changes in the political Palestinian life. The PA transferred the PLO program of liberation, based on cooperation between the armed groups and known for its intellectual and political multiplicity, into an Authority seeking to transform itself into a nation dominated by one system, thereby, monopolizing power and the political decision-making process. In order to impose its domination and the monopolization of power, the Palestinian Authority relied on the following mechanisms:

The development of an armed security force to monopolize power.

Complete control of financial resources for political purposes instead of the establishment of an economic, social and cultural society.

The enlistment of outdated social structures, and the restoration of geographical, familial and tribal ties with the goal of containing people.

Seeking to dominate the institutions and organizations of the local society.

Silencing the opposition or challenging or containing it.

Enticing the 'technocrats' by giving them a role in the political process, and most importantly, the concentration of power in the hands of 'returnees', which involved dividing political opportunities between them, without looking into their qualifications and abilities, based on the part they played in the so-called 'historical struggle abroad'. It later became clear that either the role actually played by these individuals in the national struggle was questionable, or that they had been forced upon the people under the slogan of 'the necessities of the interim phase'.

The Effects of the New Situation on the Current Political Forces

The effects of the new situation on the current political forces were as follows:

The loss of limitations and connections between the political organizations; it is no longer surprising or objectionable for Hamas to use political expressions from a 'previous' leftist political speech about imperialism and Zionism and so forth.

The sterility of political parties in terms of morality, the absence of their political speech and the reliance upon meaningless and often contradictory positions.

The contrast in positions according to area, especially between the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

The failure to find an alternative concept to the 'coexistence with the occupation' concept championed by the Authority.

The failure to find an alternative to either inner conformity or surrender, which strengthened the official political speech of the Authority and the Islamic political speech, as if no other alternative existed.

Conclusions

The fiery struggle, the long occupation and the emergence of the Authority do not match the expectations and the sacrifices made. Indeed, this struggle curtailed the ability of individuals to realize their hopes and take control of their daily life. It limited the individual's choices and aspirations, and deprived him of the chance to act and plan individually and collectively in both the short and long-term range.

The military, expansionist occupation, which was characterized by massive Israeli settlement, meant the confiscation of land, resources, freedom, and ambitions and represented a continuous injustice and permanent subjugation. An even more important

factor in determining the overall situation of the Palestinian people was the general continuously unstable situation. The Israeli military occupation, war, and bloody confrontations go hand in hand with attempts at peacemaking, negotiations and mutual activities. The incidents of repeated violence and the submission to all forms of restrictions in terms of movement and transportation and revengeful acts indelibly mark the characteristics of the Palestinian society: its individuals and groups.

The consequences of the military occupation and the current Palestinian Authority dominate everyday life for individuals and groups, creating a sense of paralysis and deterioration in living conditions.

If there is a social-political reality, it is one evident in the way in which the Palestinian Authority dealt with the incoming 'returnees' and the citizens of the West Bank and Gaza Strip and their local institutions, using the expertise of the 'returnees' in political and military mobilization, while the need was for humans with modern, civilized minds distanced from subjugation, military orders and firing one time at demonstrators and another at political prisoners. The entire culture developed by the Uprising collapsed then disappeared in terms of its social and ethical values, which had crystallized during the Uprising and in light of a struggle that had lasted a quarter of a century with the Israeli occupation. The Uprising was capable of providing ways and means to challenge the social, economic and political system that existed before it and pointed to the ways to liberation and freedom. The current whitewashing of domination, oppression, corruption and the collapse of popular and social values will not last, the reason being that the societal awareness resulting from the Uprising remains latent, hidden and continuous in people's hearts and minds. The current condition of complacency, should it continue, will result in either the dissolution of the Palestinian nation or to a Palestinian destiny similar to that of the Red Indians of America.

The overall situation that exists today is similar to other situations that have existed throughout the Arab Islamic history. Our 'country' will be born old and decrepit; corruption of an ethical, social and political nature will spread, as if there is a hidden force forcing us towards lethargy and dejection. Our response to this will be to surrender to our fate. Will a discerning public movement rise or will we wonder with some Palestinian intellectuals, who are asking: "Is permanent backwardness our destiny?"